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SUBJECT: AMIDEAST CONTINUES DESPITE BASRAH'S DANGERS

CLASSIFIED BY: Howell Howard, A/Director, Regional Embassy
Office - Basrah, Department of State.
REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

¶1. (SBU) The Basrah representative for the NGO AMIDEAST, Nezar Abbas (please protect), described the extremely difficult conditions of implementing Department-funded cultural exchange programs to REO IPAO on September 25. Nezar told us that AMIDEAST was currently promoting the Iraqi Young Leaders Exchange Program (IYLEP) and the Youth Exchange and Study Program (YES). Both programs fund respective scholarships for high-school aged Iraqis to attend a month-long leadership seminar and a yearlong study abroad. Last year, one student participated in YES and four students participated in IYLEP; one of the IYLEP students overstayed his visa.

¶2. (U) Nezar also said that there were lots of students interested in AMIDEAST's programs as indicated by the number of English language TOEFL exams he administered. Last month, there were 50 examinees for TOEFL, and some months he administered three exams of 25 students each. Exams were given in a small room with 25 seats provided in cooperation with the NGO Safe Children and the University of Basrah. Last year, there were 50 applicants for IYLEP, but only five had English scores high enough to qualify. English language programs were sorely deficient in Basrah, he said. Instructors may understand grammar, but lacked methodology, conversational skills, textbooks, and labs.

¶3. (C) Nezar, a former REO political assistant/translator, left our employment in December 2006 following the assassination of another REO translator. Things continue to be dangerous for him given his association with a USG sponsored program. Some schools with administrations or teachers associated with Jaysh al-Mahdi do not permit him to promote AMIDEAST programs and he is routinely threatened. As a precaution, AMIDEAST removes State Department's logo from program advertisements; students apply online and drop off applications at a secure box at the university; and he has taken to wearing a beard to avoid suspicion from Islamic radicals.

¶4. (SBU) Comment: Nezar clearly is committed to improving Basrah by promoting cultural understanding between Iraqis and Americans despite great personal danger. He has our utmost admiration and support. We hope to build upon his efforts by developing a Quick Reaction Funds Project for an English language lab at Basrah University. End comment.

HOWARD